

# RPG Reload File 041 – 'Guardian Saga'

[June 4, 2015](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)



Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly feature where the best way to make friends is to beat the stuffing out of them first. Each week, we take a look at an RPG from the mists of time forgotten to see how it holds up in our shocking world of the future. It's a chance to revisit old favorites, reflect on their place in the platform's history, or just to take a deeper dive than our usual reviews allow for. As the ringleader of this little circus, I try to present a show with a variety of delights for fans young and old. To make sure we're entertaining everyone in the crowd, though, I turn to you to help me out with the selection process once a month. All you have to do is comment below, post in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#) in the forums, or tweet me at [@RPGReload](#) with your suggestion. A little birdie tells me there might be a shake-up coming soon for the reader's choice, so if you really want to see me play something, you should probably get it in somewhere in the next two months.



This week's entry is *Guardian Saga* ([\\$0.99](#)), from developer 9th Bit Games. It's their sole release on iOS, with the two brothers that formed the company having both moved on to more stable work soon after. It was actually somewhat popular around here at the time, one of several attempts to fill the gap in the App Store that existed due to the absence of the actual *Dragon Quest* ([\\$2.99](#)). Mobile gamers are up to their eyeballs in official *Dragon Quest* games now, so it's easy to forget that only a few years ago, there were none. In past **Reloads** we've looked at *Minimae* ([\\$1.99](#)) and *Dragon Fantasy* ([\\$7.99](#)), both of which seemed to satisfy people's urges for a classic NES-style *Dragon Quest* experience in their own ways. Neither of those played it quite as straight as *Guardian Saga* does, however.

In speaking with one of the developers to get some background information on the game, I was surprised to find out that *Guardian Saga* is actually the second game in the series. The original title, *Guardian*, was released for the TI-89 graphing calculator. Released somewhere around 1999 to 2000, it was the first full game created by the Chard brothers, who were in high school at the time. When they decided to work on an iOS game as a hobby project in March of 2011, they chose to name the game after *Guardian*. If you're

interested in trying that game out, you can still find it pretty easily online. Just slap it into the TI-89 you've got on the coffee table and you're good to go. As for *Guardian Saga*, the hobby project turned into a full time production pretty quickly, resulting in a blazing fast development period of less than five months. The game released in July of 2011 and received its final update in October 2011. While there were plans for an additional update or a sequel, the Chard brothers soon found employment with a major studio, leaving little time to go back to *Guardian Saga*. Never say never, but at least for now, this game is going to have to stand as-is.

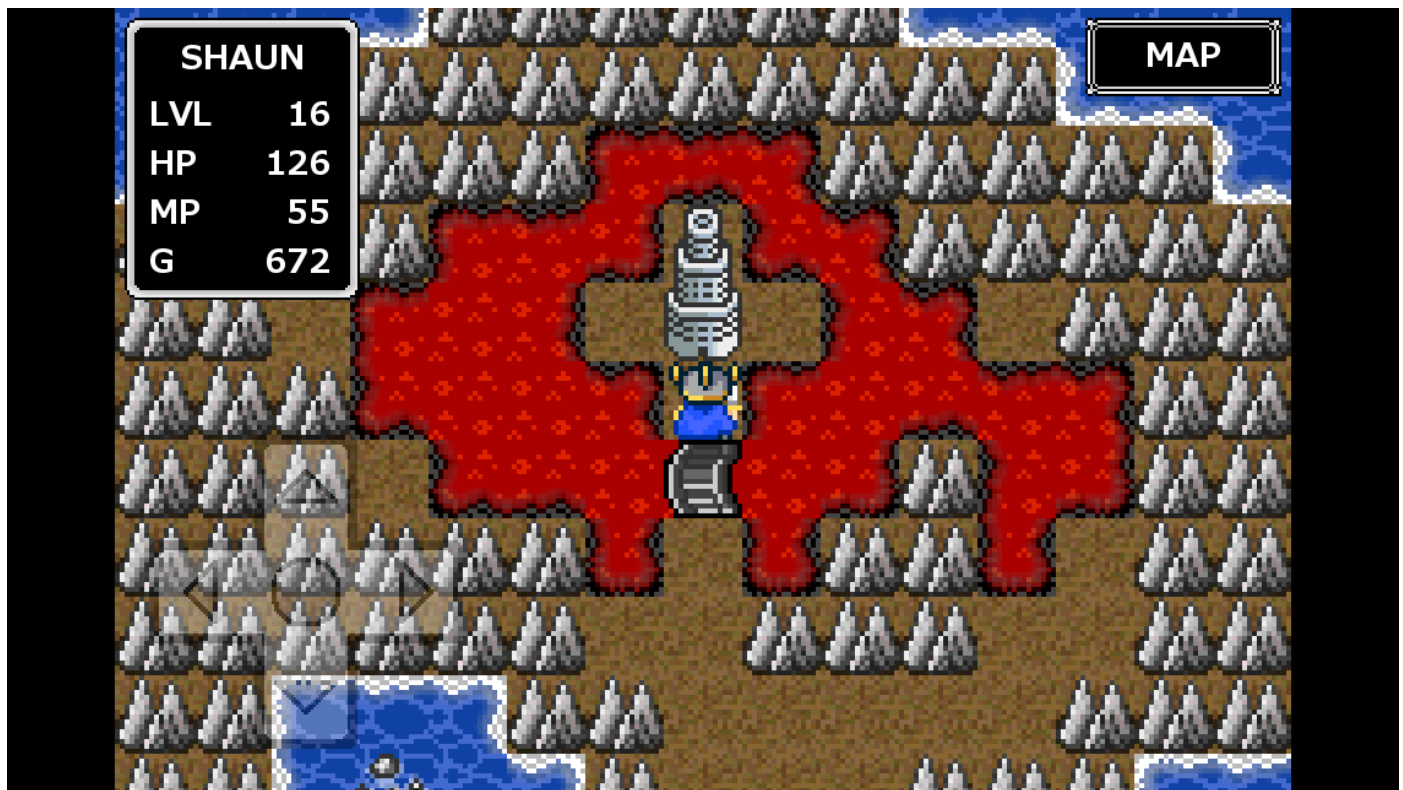


It's perhaps impressive, then, that the game somehow managed to keep working fine up until iOS 8. Sadly, that vicious dragon slew many brave knights with its arrival, and though *Guardian Saga* was merely grazed, the attack caused heavy damage. If you're playing the game on iOS 8, I have good news and bad news for you. The good news is, you get to take advantage of an exclusive hardcore difficulty mode. The bad news is that you have no choice in the matter, because the game no longer saves properly. The game supports multitasking and takes up a very small footprint in your device's memory, but you'll have to be exceptionally careful if you

don't plan to finish this in one sitting. There are also some sound glitches, but they're a small inconvenience relative to the save issue. According to the developer, these problems come from the fact that the game was built on an engine that stopped updating somewhere around iOS 4, and fixing it would involve digging into someone's else's ancient code and making serious rewrites. Rather than try that, they've started looking at remaking the game in Unity. If that happens, it would be delivered as a free update to existing owners and enable 9th Bit to port it across platforms more easily.

Well, enough about that business, let's get onto the game itself. When I said *Guardian Saga* played its homage to *Dragon Quest* fairly straight, I meant it. And I mean *Dragon Quest 1*, not *Dragon Quest* in general. Your basic goal is to visit the temples scattered around the world where the Guardians, god-like protectors of the world, reside. Something's gone a little fishy lately, so the King sends you out to check what's going on at the nearby Temple of Balance. You soon find out that the Guardians have become corrupted. The only way to bring them around is to beat some sense into them, one by one. It's as good a reason for a walk around the world as any. Conveniently, the starting castle is located in the center of the map, with the four remaining temples found in each of the four cardinal directions, more or less.

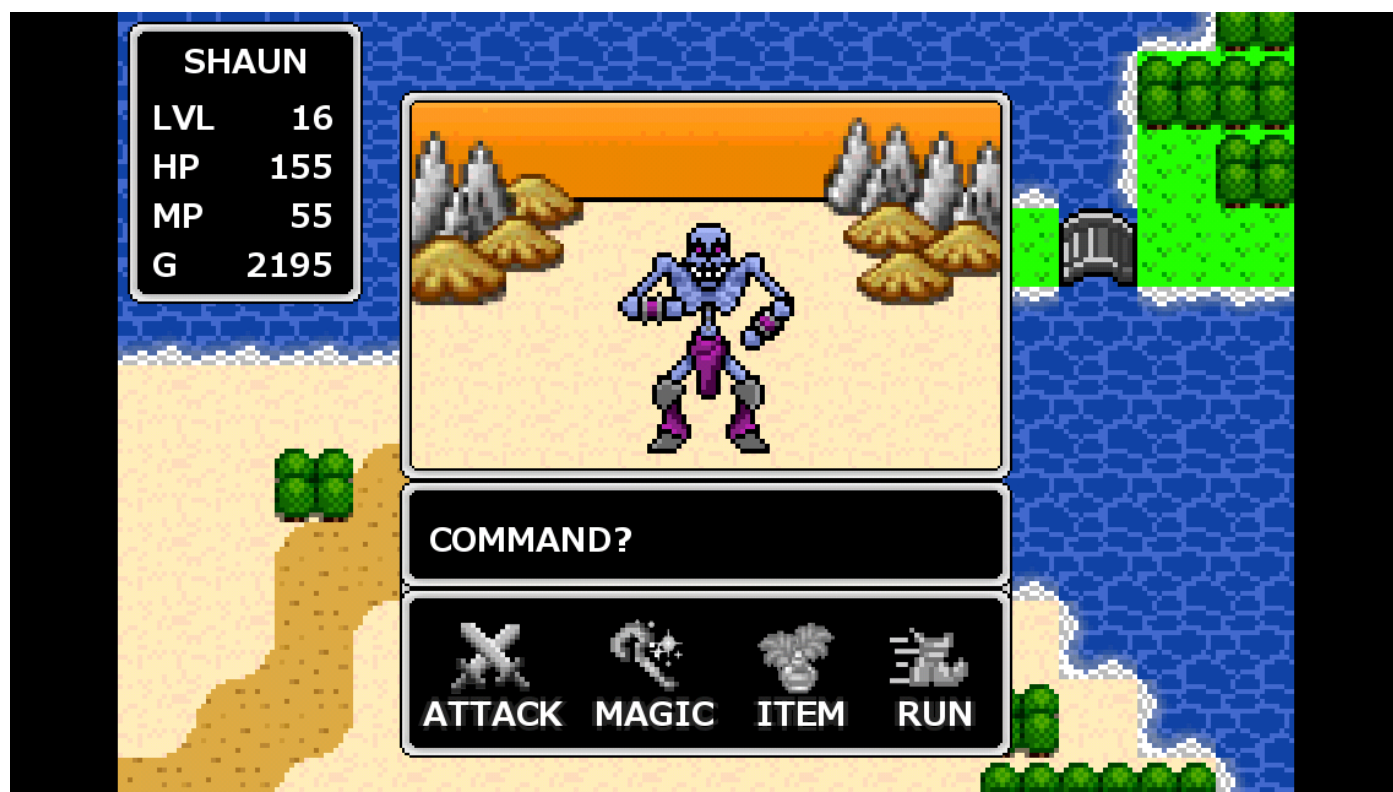




You play as a lone hero who can fight reasonably well and is able to learn a handful of magic spells over the course of the game. At the start of the game, you're fairly fragile and equipment is ridiculously costly relative to the average enemy money drop. It's up to you how long you want to grind, but you don't necessarily need every piece of gear before you continue on. At any moment you're not inside a safe area like a town or castle, you're subject to frequent random encounters. The battles are turn-based affairs where you can choose from a few different commands. Generally, you'll want to either fight or cast your strongest offensive magic, only changing that strategy if you run out of MP or your HP gets a little low. There aren't really many other strategies than that, which makes battles in this game a little anticlimactic. The Guardians themselves are mostly pushovers as long as your level is where it should be.

That's not terribly different from the first *Dragon Quest*, of course. When tactics are limited, fights generally come down to the mathematics more than anything. As in *Dragon Quest*, the challenge in *Guardian Saga* comes down to surviving attrition. Each battle will leave your MP and supplies in a little worse shape than before, and though the dungeons aren't massive or

anything, they're big enough. Throw in a fairly high encounter rate and you'll have to constantly assess whether you're going to be able to survive the rest of the trip or if you should just head home and upgrade your gear. The game offers you a little clemency in that whenever you level up, your HP and MP are topped off. If you time it right, those level-ups can hit in the middle of a dungeon where they're most useful. Your character caps off at level 25, and the last levels approaching that tend to come more slowly. By that point, you probably have more than enough money to splurge on elixirs to restore your MP, however, so all's well that ends well.



The main game consists of just five dungeons and their respective bosses, but there is some significant side content if you want to get all of the best gear. The enemies found in these optional dungeons are pretty strong, but they're also great for grinding a few more levels before you head on to the final boss. While their layouts aren't too tricky to navigate, with the old trick of following one wall working like a wonderful charm here, surviving long enough to reach the goodies at the end can be tricky, even with a powered up hero. Still, with enough elixirs, you are basically invincible, so all you have to do is pack accordingly. It's definitely worth taking on the optional content,

since the main game is only a few hours long on its own, and the last boss can be a real bear if you aren't in the right shape to face it.

If I sound like I'm lacking a bit of enthusiasm here, you're probably reading me correctly. *Guardian Saga* is a very competent and complete ode to the original *Dragon Quest*. I quite enjoyed my first run through it when I played it in 2011, and I certainly appreciated it for trying to fill in the role that it did. Replaying it in 2015, with the game it draws inspiration from readily available for a similar cost, I'm less certain of my feelings about it. *Dragon Quest 1* is a very simple game, and in a lot of ways, *Guardian Saga* is even simpler. There are very few puzzles, and it never takes much guessing to figure out where you need to go next. The battles, as mentioned, are very straight-forward affairs, and you'll be fighting a lot of them. I do like the battle graphics quite a bit, though. The monster designs hit the mark well in feeling like they came from the NES. Outside of battles, I wish the camera were pulled back just a little bit further, but the sprites themselves look decent enough. I like most of the music in the game, but I'm not a big fan of the battle music.



I don't know, I think there's merit in its simplicity. It's not much fun when you

have to go scrambling for a guide or wander around talking to everyone to figure out where you were going when you had to leave off last time, especially given the circumstances playing an RPG on a phone can lead to. In that regard, the way you can slip into and out of *Guardian Saga* easily is one of its strengths. You can play it fairly mindlessly and it's mostly stress-free. And it's certainly worth the first playthrough. I just have trouble envisioning a scenario where I'd replay it over opening up *Dragon Quest 1* and doing that instead. Or replaying something more satisfying than both, to be honest. A lot of *Dragon Quest's* value came from providing a foundation for greater things. If it had only ever been one game, if it hadn't established the rules for an entire sub-genre, I'm not sure how many people would even care about it today. I think *Guardian Saga* is an excellent foundation, and I strongly feel a sequel or two could really lead to something great, but taken as it is now, all on its own, it's just a bud that's waiting to blossom.

While I've already talked about its current compatibility issues, I should also mention that having not been updated since 2011, it lacks support for larger iPhone screens, iCloud, controllers, and all of that sort of thing. The few updates it got were excellent, though. 9th Bit added support for multitasking and playing your own audio while playing, made the app universal, reduced the encounter rate, and added the ability for a character in each town to give you hints. They also added in the ability to use items in battle, which kind of broke the game but in a good way that reduced grinding. The save feature was improved to allow you to save anywhere, so kind of the opposite of its current state, and a world map was added. In short, they made a game that was bit too tough in a bad way into a game that's perhaps a little too easy. At least one other big update was planned, but it first became too big, then became a sequel instead, then went on the backburner.





I'll say one more time so that everyone can see it: you can't save your game at all if you're running iOS 8, so unless you're very careful juggling apps, it would be pretty hard to get through the entire game on devices running modern iOS. In its time, *Guardian Saga* served its purpose well. For now, it seems that time is over, but who knows what the future might bring? Anyway, that's just my take on the game. What do you think? Please leave your comments below, post in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or tweet me at [@RPGReload](#), and don't forget to vote for your reader's choice. Also, in case you missed it, we [posted a new episode](#) of the **RPG Reload Podcast** last Monday, so make sure to check that out, too. As for me, I'll be back next week with another vintage RPG. Thanks for reading!

**Next Week's Reload Hint:** *The knight spins, the bishop rotates.*